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HUMOR: THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Glenn A. Hartz and Ralph Hunt

COMPARED with other topics in the philosophy of mind, humor has received little attention—its aesthetic dimension (beauty) and evolutionary roots (beast) even less.¹ To attempt filling these voids, we will first locate humor's defining characteristics, distinguishing it from moods and other attitudes. We will not be offering sufficient conditions for amusement—one might as well try to specify them for a song's becoming a hit. Instead, only necessary conditions will be listed, along with some typical accompaniments which include evolutionary aspects. Next, Kant's theory is compared with ours. Finally, we defend our claim that an aesthetic dimension is essential to certain kinds of humor.

I. THE NATURE OF HUMOR

A brief sketch of our general theory is important as background. We hold that humor is an emotion, where emotions typically involve: (1) feelings of various sorts; (2) involuntariness—the fact that they typically come upon us without our deliberation; and (3) an unusual bodily condition.² Emotions, unlike moods, have a focus or intentional object. Joy, anger and amusement must attach to some object on which the subject is focusing—though the “focusing” may not be a deliberate, conscious action. It makes no sense to say that someone is joyful about nothing at all, or angry at nothing in particular. Something or other must likewise be funny, or else one must view any associated laughter as thoroughly hollow and of the sort heard in the halls of an asylum. Of course there are moods which border on these emotions. An overwhelming and pervasive feeling of euphoria, a joking mood, and “good humor” are moods because they have no objects. For that very reason they *aren't* the emo-

tions of joy and amusement; they're *moods*: a “good mood,” jollity, and good humor.

In the following necessary conditions, *x* ranges over all objects, actions, situations and sets of propositions, *t* over all times, and *S* ranges over all humans.

S finds some features of *x* amusing at *t* only if:

- (1) at *t* *S* is in a non-threat situation; and
- (2) *S* perceives *x* at *t*; and
- (3) *S* has some contextual, background information on the basis of which to form expectations; and
- (4) *S* is aware that some specific features of *x* are incongruous with her expectations; and
- (5) *S* then feels some pleasure.

We analyze what it is for *S* to find *x* funny at *a time* because the same item might appear so at one time but not another. A change in the agent's attitude (suddenly finding out one's father is an adulterer) or in the social setting (a political figure is assassinated) can make a formerly humorous item completely non-amusing. All the states mentioned here are considered *occurrent*, not merely dispositional. In (2) “perceives” designates a wide range of mental feats—seeing, hearing, noticing, remembering, reminiscing, dreaming, imagining.

(3), which concerns expectations formed on the basis of background information, is vague, but will be illustrated presently. (4)'s requirement that *S* be aware of “some specific features of *x*” ensures that humor fits in with other emotions insofar as it has an intentional object or focus. (5) requires not pure pleasure, but only “some pleasure,” since some humor (say, a satirical portrait of

one's own foibles) includes a stinging, painful element. Still, if the experience were a *complete* downer, there wouldn't be anything funny.

(1) says that *S* can't be amused when she feels significantly threatened. No doubt there are borderline cases between threat and non-threat situations, but we know well enough the clear cases on both ends. Terrifying lightning storms usually block out amusement. We say "usually" because occasional laughter in tense situations is the exception that proves the rule. In most such cases the joker is attempting to relieve the tension with the aid of the non-tension of laughter, to "lighten" the situation. Most other cases of "inappropriate" laughter tend to bespeak more nervousness than humor.

Ours is a *cognitive* theory in virtue of (2), (3) and (4): *S* can find *x* funny only when *S* (possibly non-veridically) perceives *x*'s features as incongruous. Without these conditions we'd be back in the asylum. (3) says that in *S* can be amused only if she already has in mind some contextual information on which to base expectations. There is no such thing as *a priori* humor; nothing so funny that *anyone* would "get it"; nothing which is funny as such. Kierkegaard makes this point nicely with regard to caricature: "...the caricature must resemble a human being, an actual, particular person; if it resembles no one at all, it is not comical, but is a straightforward essay in the sphere of the unmeaning fantastic."³ Someone with no context for generating expectations would be stone deaf to amusing situations and jokes. If the "setup" is absent, so is the humor.

(4) requires that when *S* is amused, the "penny drops" in some sense in relation to his expectations. That is, something about *x* appears not to line up well with what was expected given the background information of (3), and this strikes him as funny. We can illustrate the dynamics of (2) - (4) by means of aesthetic examples which will later be expanded.

In dramatic comedy the congruous and incongruous work together. Success depends as much on overall dramatic situations as on specific jokes. The structure of the play seems equally important: an endless stream of one-liners, devoid of plot, does not work.

The same structural requirements hold with more informal joke-telling, as anyone knows who has seen married couples destroy one another's humor through complicated interruptions with apparently well-intentioned "corrections."

It would seem as if epigrams like those of Oscar Wilde were also strong confirmation of this incongruity element. Phrases such as "Divorces are made in heaven" and "The widow's hair turned gold with grief" strike us strongly with the incongruity between the expected conventional aphorism and what Wilde does with it; they amuse through the surprise of the unexpected. When in *The Importance of Being Earnest* Algernon asks his butler if he heard his piano-playing, and the butler replies, "I didn't think it would be polite to listen, Sir," we are surprised by the incongruity of a comparison between listening in on conversations and listening to music.

But in (4) we've not referred to a "surprising" incongruity, instead opting for the more quiescent "is aware of." Requiring a "surprising incongruity" would leave unexplained the fact that humor like Wilde's can continue to amuse long after the surprise has exhausted its effects. Something can still be funny after several readings, when the reader knows exactly what is coming. Indeed, when stories or phrases strike us as funny we often find ourselves repeating them in our mind or to others, when there is no possibility of being surprised by what we have already memorized.

Robert C. Roberts and John Morreall have discussed this problem: Roberts says

...it is clear that the punch line need not be literally unexpected, for we are often amused by telling jokes that do not surprise us, since we have carefully devised (or memorized) them ourselves. And it is very implausible to suggest, as Morreall does, that we continue to find an old joke amusing only if, each time we laugh, we discover some new dimension of incongruity.⁴

Roberts relies instead on the concept of "freshness:" "It might also be called punch, or vividness, or even vision. For when we are amused by an incongruity it 'lives' for us in an especially fresh or vivid way."⁵

Now there is little doubt that freshness *enhances* the humorous reaction, as Twain illustrates when distinguishing between good (American, "humorous") versus bad (English and French, "comic") storytelling. He writes,

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through. And sometimes, if he has had good success, he is so glad and happy that he will repeat the 'nub' of it and glance around from face to face, collecting applause, and then repeat it again. It is a pathetic thing to see.⁶

But notice that the comic storyteller himself can receive more enjoyment than his victims. That's the other side of the coin: familiarity—an *absence* of surprise or freshness—isn't antithetic to humor. Even Roberts's more rarefied "freshness" might well be absent from an eighth reading of Wilde, which nonetheless can still be funny. On the other hand, no doubt there is an upper limit to how many times a passage can be found humorous—especially if the readings or listening periods are closely grouped together. Boredom can finally kill even the Wildest pleasures.

There seem to be clear cases of enjoying humor which fall between the surprising/fresh ones and those in which all hope of finding something funny has been drowned in boredom. Our theory allows for those cases: one can enjoy Wilde for the fifteenth time.

II. TYPICAL ACCOMPANIMENTS: LAUGHTER, COMMUNICATION, AND TRIVIALIZATION

There are also some typical accompanying conditions which are present in full-blooded "paradigm scenarios" but which nevertheless are not necessary conditions. Among them are

- (6) *S* is disposed to laugh and have generally pleasant bodily sensations due to the fact that tension has been released by the laughter.
- (7) *S* is disposed to communicate to others, typically through smiles and laughter, the fact that she finds some features of *x* humorous.

- (8) *S* regards the objects involved in *x* as in some sense belittled or trivialized.
- (9) *S*'s response is enhanced by the aesthetic dimensions of *x*.

In (6) and (7) we move away from the requirement that the states be *occurrent*: "is disposed to" here requires either that one be *ocurrently* laughing/communicating, or strongly disposed to do those things. Certainly one can be amused without actually laughing or in fact communicating anything to anyone.⁷ Discussion of (9) will be postponed until the final section.

If materialist accounts of human beings are accurate, then (5) might swallow up (6) in virtue of the fact that all feelings are bodily sensations of one sort or another. We have separated (5) from (6) partly because we wish to remain neutral about the ultimate ontological status of feelings. We believe some positive feelings are required for humor. If pleasant bodily sensations are distinct from feelings, we're listing those sensations as accidental accompaniments.⁸

Notice that (6) may help to explain (5)—that is, it may be that often the source of pleasure in humor is the set of bodily sensations which are involved in laughter. Still, there are good reasons to keep these separate. We want a quadriplegic to be able to feel pleasure when she finds *x* amusing, but in her case there is no capacity for having the typical bodily sensations of (6). Indeed, studies reveal that those who have suffered spinal cord injuries have generally diminished emotional experience because of the absence of bodily sensation.⁹ We can only guess that brains in vats would have still more impoverished emotions. Yet on our theory these levels of diminished capacity for bodily sensation don't affect *S*'s ability to find *x* humorous, because (6) isn't a necessary condition for humor.

(7) can be motivated on evolutionary grounds. The communicative value of humor seems to be that it is as evolutionarily "profitable" to advertise a safe, pleasant play situation as it is to announce dangerous situations with distress calls and cries of alarm. There is no necessary connection between having a pain and crying out, and evolution would militate against it (alerting

predators, etc.), were some benefits not entailed. Likewise with laughter.

A communication function of laughter goes against John Morreall's point, expanded below, regarding the "purposelessness of amusement."¹⁰ In contrasting his highly cognitive and abstract concept of humor with the immediate purposefulness of emotions, he claims that in the case of amusement "we don't get prepared to do anything at all.... amusement, like other kinds of non-practical experience, does not motivate us...." But if humor communicates, it is highly purposeful.

External signals of an emotion like humor would be useful to offspring in a play situation—to let those in the vicinity know whether an adult or larger sibling was in the mood for play. Play is often described by ethologists as a sort of preparation for life, wherein the young of a species practice necessary future skills. Since many of these skills are often deadly ones, it is essential that claws be drawn and teeth not bared. Such "harmless killing" is the basic incongruity of much play, and if laughter did indeed evolve from play situations, it may have done so with this initial incongruity intact. Laugh and the world laughs with you; philosophize and you philosophize alone.

The evolutionary roots of a congruous/incongruity theory can perhaps be traced to the play of chimpanzees. Jan van Hoof says "Any zoo keeper will readily concur that chimpanzees laugh," noting "a striking resemblance between this chimpanzee expression and human laughter."¹¹ There are differences in the positioning of the lips, and the quick and shallow chimp "ah's" are more staccato than the longer expiration of human "ha's."

The most significant of van Hoof's "striking resemblances" is that congruous/incongruous laughter-inducing situations are very similar for chimps and children. The ah-ah vocalizing occurs primarily when there are sudden changes in chimp play interaction. Here they trick one another, "trying to spring a surprise whenever possible. Of course each 'player' expects a tickle, a tackle, or a turn, but the element of surprise is in their precise location and timing." Van Hoof notes the similarity with a human adult tick-

ling a child: "The giggle or laugh is produced when the expected plus unexpected occurs in a playful atmosphere."

This description fits much humor: the incongruous interacts with the congruous in a relaxed mood and atmosphere. A joke when you're not in the right mood or setting is not funny. Nor, often, is the totally unexpected: if a stranger were to sneak up behind us in a dark alley and scream "Divorces are made in heaven," it would not be funny. At least not at the time.

But van Hoof's description goes *against* Morreall's highly cognitivist claim that humor and emotion "represent different survival strategies" and that we use humor to block emotion, because in the "development of reason, emotions would have been not a boon but an encumbrance...." The blockage of emotions by the more cognitively-oriented capacities of humor "facilitated the development of rationality, for emotions, which served pre-human animals so well, would often get in the way of rational thinking, as indeed they still do."¹² With chimpanzees, however, laughter and emotion get along perfectly well together: laughter arises from emotional situations. The "rational" communicative needs which human laughter evolved to serve appear to have originally been emotion-based. Emotion and rationality are better thought of as co-evolving and interdependent than as competitive. In any case, it is a live question whether thought and emotion can be partitioned as sharply as Morreall and others suppose.

Finally with regard to (8), which concerns belittling or trivializing: a feature found in many forms of humor is a denigration of the subject matter. We expect something treated as laughable to be made somehow smaller and less complicated than life. Such simplification, which has been noted by others,¹³ has the further subsidiary effect of trivialization. A tragedy is generally "larger" than a comedy, with its fuller development of characterization and greater depth of thought. The subject of a joke is usually belittled in some way, even if the joker is "only kidding." As Aristotle said, "a joke is a type of abuse" and hence must be handled with moral decorum (*Nichomachean Ethics*, iv 8). The very setting

of humor seems to indicate, "this isn't real; it's just a joke." Thus the subject matter is deprived of a certain measure of dignity and size. The incongruity also contributes: no one likes to be incongruous. This seems to be the nature of the beast, and not simply a shortcoming of humor. People often jump from the trivializing effect of humorous material to the trivialization of humor itself. Humor has gotten a bad press over the years, from Plato to Lord Chesterfield, as being beneath the dignity of high-minded souls. Since the target is usually trivialized, the messenger is perhaps blamed for the message.

It might be the nonthreat setting that also contributes to the downplay of humorous subject matter. If the setting is always somewhat inconsequential and playful, then that atmosphere is bound to infect the material itself. The object of nearly any joke is made to share the inconsequentiality. The subject matter simply cannot be taken very seriously. In such cases of trivialization, "serious" is truly the opposite of humorous—serious in the sense of non-trivial.

A further consequence of the trivialization is that people and institutions hate being laughed at. This is understandable, since nobody herself enjoys being trivialized, amusing as it may be to have other things shrunken. It is one reason why satire can be so effective. The "superiority theory" seems to derive from the trivialization of the object of derision: one can only feel superior through the tendency of humor to make the subject look inferior.

III. COMPARISON WITH KANT'S THEORY

Kant's brief treatment of humor refers to several of these elements. He writes in the third *Critique*,

...all changing free play of sensations...gratifies, because it furthers the feeling of health. We may subdivide this free play of sensations into the *play of fortune* [games of chance], the *play of tone* [music], and the *play of thought* [wit].

...music and that which excites laughter are two different kinds of play with aesthetical ideas...which can give lively gratification merely by their changes. Thus we recognize pretty clearly that the animation in both cases

is merely bodily, although it is excited by ideas of the mind, and that the feeling of health produced by a motion of the intestines corresponding to the play in question makes up that whole gratification of a gay party which is regarded as so refined and so spiritual. It is not the judging the harmony in tones or sallies of wit, which serves only in combination with their beauty as a necessary vehicle, but the furtherance of the vital bodily processes, the affection that moves the intestines and the diaphragm—in a word, the feeling of health....

...In the case of jokes...the play begins with the thoughts which together occupy the body, so far as they admit of sensible expression; and as the understanding stops suddenly short at this presentment, in which it does not find what it expected, we feel the effect of this slackening in the body by the oscillation of the organs, which promotes the restoration of equilibrium and has a favorable influence upon health.

In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd.

...*Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*. This transformation[s]...cause must consist in the influence of the representation upon the body and the reflex effect of this upon the mind.¹⁴

We can summarize Kant's view in terms of our conditions (1) - (9) as follows. Condition (1), concerning *S*'s perceiving some features of *x*, must be met because Kant claims that the play begins with the understanding's thoughts of a particular object or situation. This clearly makes Kant's theory, like ours, a *cognitive* theory. There is no mention of (2), the non-threat condition, though Kant would likely agree that in threatening situations one is generally able to enjoy neither games of chance, nor music, nor jokes.

The conditions requiring a context for expectations and noticing an incongruity with those expectations—(3) and (4)—are clearly present here: he says that the understanding "does not find what it expected" in the humorous situation, that that which is funny is in some sense "absurd." (5), the "feeling of pleasure" condition, is obviously met because Kant is requiring that all items in the genus, *feelings of health*, are pleasant ("gratifying") feelings.

Notice that he allows for two main causal factors contributing to the pleasure: (i) the “play” of aesthetical ideas and sensations, and (ii) the “reflex” effect of the bodily sensations associated with laughter upon the mind. This illustrates the distinction mentioned above between two sources of the feelings mentioned in (5)—namely, the intellectual pleasure involved in humor and the pleasant bodily sensations which form condition (6). When Kant classifies humor with music and says “aesthetical ideas” and “beautiful sallies of wit” incite laughter, he’s endorsing some sort of aesthetic dimension—our condition (9)—in humor.

In our theory (6), which concerns “laughter/pleasant bodily sensations,” is only a typical, not a necessary condition for humor. Kant, by contrast, seems to make this necessary. The explicit mention of intestines, the diaphragm, oscillation of the organs, equilibrium, and a feeling of health which is “merely bodily” invite one to see an unusual bodily condition as required for humor. His theory is very similar in this regard to the “relief” theories, which take it to be essential to humor that certain tensions be released through the movement of bodily organs—typically through laughter.

As we have said, this proscribes quadriplegics and brains in vats from the realm of the possibly humored, and that seems too high a price to pay. It also rules out the possibility that a Martian enjoys a joke, but expresses this by a non-tension-releasing waving of his hand rather than by a convulsive laugh. In short, normal human physiological trappings would be required for all subjects capable of humor, and that seems unnecessarily narrow.

IV. HUMOR AND AESTHETICS

Kant mentions but doesn’t explore our (9), the claim that the humorous response is enhanced by the subject matter’s aesthetic dimensions. Recent theorists addressing this topic have settled for mainly noting general similarities between aesthetic matters and mirth. For example, they argue that one can develop a taste for certain types of art as well as for certain types of humor,¹⁵ and that both items involve the use of imagination¹⁶ and

distancing¹⁷ and have no ethical sanctions attached to them.¹⁸ We will now defend the claim that, especially in certain kinds of humor, aesthetic matters play a crucial role.

What kinds? Mainly varieties of what we’ll call *advertent* humor, as contrasted with those of *inadvertent* humor. Advertent humor is found in cases where someone intends to communicate or receive amusing feelings, attitudes, or messages. It is found in activities which require skill and intelligence, such as storytelling, drama, poetry, anecdotes, novels, jokes, puns, mime, “funny faces.”

Inadvertent humor, by contrast, doesn’t require skill, and the person involved isn’t trying to communicate or receive anything: for example, someone unintentionally slips on a banana peel or is wearing a hat which happens to strike someone as funny. Even amusing slips of the tongue qualify, since, though resembling jokes in some respects, they weren’t intentionally crafted by the perpetrator. In such cases we’re more inclined to laugh *at* the perpetrator, whereas in advertent humor, the chief quarry is laughter *with* the perpetrator. Advertent humor invites aesthetic value judgments like “That is well done” and “Beautiful job.” The difference is between someone’s accidentally falling down and a mime’s ingenious mimicking of that fall. The points we make in the remainder of this section concern only advertent humor.

First, such humor has an *artful* dimension to it. The situation is contrived by the novelist, the playwright, the storyteller, so that the incongruity fits. The sense of timing, the creative use of imagery and contrast, the rhythm of story all contribute to its being funny. It seems well-nigh impossible for a piece of wooden prose or a story told badly—say, by Twain’s comic—to be very funny because it is so unartfully expressed. No doubt the role of the artful helps account for another similarity between humor and aesthetics—that one can develop a favorite type of humor as well as a favorite type of art. This enhances our earlier explanation of why one can return often to a piece and still find it funny: its beauty draws one back. One

may similarly return to the same works of art and enjoy them on each occasion.

Second, both aesthetic and humorous situations involve *pleasure*. They are both overall positive experiences; one enjoys a tour through the gallery or a funny remark.

Third, both require non-threat situations. Under duress, enjoying a joke is typically as difficult as is delighting in a love sonnet or indulging in that exquisite pleasure attendant to one's first go at the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Fourth, the humor response, unlike other emotions but like the aesthetic response, is *necessarily authentic*. One can duplicate fear and anger and sorrow on a stage, but one can't duplicate beauty, or artfulness, or humor. Aristotle in the *Poetics* talks about the "imitation of an action," and the fear in a dramatic production is an imitation of fear and the anger is an imitation of anger. But it makes no sense to say that the comic element is an imitation of humor: it is humor.

A playgoer, likewise, understands that what he is watching is "not real." He does not, if he is normal, jump up on the stage to take the gun from the villain or shed real tears for the dispossessed widow. His amusement, however, is real. Stage laughter may be fake, but audience laughter is real, as opposed to the other emotions felt. Any Aristotelean catharsis of emotion is easily distinguishable from real fear and pity, and is generally forgotten as the theatre-goer searches for a missing glove. But the amusement is either authentic or not there at all: it's in a different category.

Perhaps this is because in such cases humor is "already" aesthetic. If it were an aesthetic emotion to begin with, then it would take no alteration in the setting to achieve aesthetic success. Such "instant aestheticism" causes us to judge humor content differently than other aspects. We are making an aesthetic decision each time we laugh, in the same way we make a similar judgment when we "decide" whether a whole work is good, bad, indifferent, etc. The more we laugh, the more positive our decision.

Fifth, *incongruity within a congruous setting*—the hallmark of humor—is also essential to aesthetic success. An individual piece

of humor, with its unexpected event nested within expected events, is of the same structure, in small, as the larger aesthetic experience. Creativity in general involves inserting the unexpected into the expected—connecting things that are not usually connected. In aesthetics, most genres follow established forms, yet at the same time the artist is expected to inject originality into his use of the expected. Symphonies and plays, for instance, require fairly rigid structural devices, as well as doing something that has not been done before. The most radical of avant-garde art follows patterns of some sort, then breaks from them in some way.

Such a conjunction can be seen in the sonnet form, especially in the Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnet. This tightly structured love poem evolved from the Petrarchan or Italian sonnet and reached epidemic proportions in England in the 1590's. The fourteen lines of iambic pentameter (ten syllables alternately stressed and unstressed) are divided into three quatrains and a concluding heroic couplet, rime scheme abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The twelve lines of the quatrains develop the main love theme of the poem while the concluding pair of rimed lines often spring on the reader an ironic reversal of what has gone before. An excellent example is Shakespeare's Sonnet #73:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the
cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds
sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self that seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love
more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave 'ere
long.

The first stanza indicates the narrator is, like the year, about to die: “Bare ruined choirs” arguably compares the trees empty of their birds to a desolated church’s empty choir stalls. The second stanza continues the death imagery, this time with the rapid onset of night. In the final quatrain, the dying life/fire is now choked by the ashes of what once nourished the flame. But the heroic couplet at the end throws a switch: death becomes life as the narrator realizes that the onset of the end brings the two people closer than ever.

While it may seem almost sacrilige to compare a Shakespearean heroic couplet to a punch line, there are clear similarities. As with humor, the expectations lead to an unexpected reversal, a sudden incongruity. While not all sonnets can attain to this level of expertise and reversal, they do all follow a very strict form coupled with “something different.” It would not be considered artistic creation if it did not in some way belie expectations. The main criticism of “greeting card verse” and bad poetry in general is that all the sentiments and all the rimes are expected.

Sixth, both humor and aesthetics allow one to *distance oneself from what is appreciated*. Humor, as we have argued, is already somewhat distanced from immediate needs in virtue of the non-threat condition. And as John Hospers says, the “fundamental attitude of the esthetic experience” must be separated “from the needs and desires of everyday life.” He continues:

Ordinarily we perceive a chair simply as something to sit on, a murky sky as a forecast of rain, the sound of a bell as the signal for ‘dinner’ or ‘guests’ or ‘time to get up’. But the esthetic attitude can occur only when this practical response to our environment is held in suspension. ...On these occasions we are perceiving something ‘not for the sake of action, but for the sake of perceiving’.¹⁹

Such distance has recently been challenged by Ronald de Sousa and others,²⁰ who claim that laughing at a sexist joke makes one a sexist. But if amusement is an aesthetic experience, the issue is further complicated: if it is sexist to laugh at a sexist joke in the locker room, is it sexist to laugh at

a sexist joke in Shakespeare’s *Taming of the Shrew*? Is it wrong to laugh at an anti-semitic joke in *The Merchant of Venice*, or in just about any English comedy before the last fifty years?

De Sousa indicates that his criticisms of malicious humor may not apply to aesthetics.²¹ The point needs further exploration, since there are several connected issues here.

First, in the case of a play, audience decisions about whether or not to laugh at a given production are no more crucial than interpretive decisions made by directors and actors in staging it. A perennial problem in Shakespeare productions has been how to play the Jew Shylock, who was often portrayed as a clown of “low” comedy until in 1741 the part was given more dignity by the actor Charles Macklin.²² Shylock has been played a thousand ways since, and each actor’s and director’s interpretive decision is largely a reaction to the anti-semitism inherent in the part.

Second, we need to know whether racist or sexist humor, when it appears in a work of art, plays an essential role in determining its aesthetic value. *Prima facie*, the answer seems to be yes: there can be no question of editing *Taming of the Shrew* for sexism and ending up with much of a play. It would seem strange to say that such artworks are good comedy if we also say that we should not laugh at them. At the same time many of us would admit to feeling discomfort in the presence of comedy that degrades large groups of people—a discomfort notably absent from cases in which an individual who is not representing some “type” is being comically degraded.

Sometimes there is no problem: we often laugh at the purveyor of the sexist remarks rather than with him, as with tv’s Archie Bunker. We similarly laugh at Sheridan’s Mrs. Malaprop *because* she mangles English, rather than at the English language itself. Nonetheless, there are many old comedies where we are clearly supposed to be laughing *with* the purveyor of the sexist humor *at* its victim: Mrs. Malaprop, after all, seems to represent Sheridan’s opinion of women with “intellectual pretensions.” This is a more dif-

ficult situation, since it apparently requires us to share the purveyor's sexist attitudes.

One solution is judging a work of art in terms of its time of production. We tend to forgive Shakespeare his anti-semitism more than we forgive an anti-semitic joke made last week because anti-semitism was part of the "age" of Shakespeare while we now hopefully know better. Such a strategy does not always work, however, since in the case of *Taming of the Shrew* there was contemporary disagreement with Shakespeare's viewpoint towards women. *The Woman's Prize, or, the Tamer Tamed*, by Shakespeare's colleague John Fletcher, is a direct satire on *Taming of the Shrew*, giving us an artistic rendering of Shakespeare's hero Petruchio years later, after he has overworked his Kate into an early grave and is looking for a new victim. Although dating the play is speculative, it is referred to as an "old play" in a 1633 production that proved very popular and was probably written within a few years of *Taming of the Shrew*. Its popularity might indicate that more people than Fletcher found Shakespeare's attitude towards women laughable. So the question arises of how much "of his time" a writer's ideas must be to be forgivable: is it still sexist if fifty percent of his contemporaries have more enlightened views? One percent? There would seem to be no way to determine.

At the bottom of de Sousa's worry about unethical laughter is the malicious attitude it seems to presuppose. But in an aesthetic setting, it isn't clear whether the attitudes must actually be held, since typically the malice is at least one step removed. The advertent/inadvertent distinction helps sort this out: there is quite a difference between laughing at the inadvertent humor involving a woman on the streets trying to parallel park and laughing at the advertent humor present in a story about women drivers. The latter case is an example of laughing at *someone else's malicious portrayal*, at their way of relating the incident. Matters of artistry could make the amusing portrayal attractive in spite of the malice, whereas eyewitness malice would normally lack any such rationale.

Both de Sousa and Roberts find the issue largely depends on whether a "suspension of

attitudes" can accompany a suspension of belief in dealing with literary works: de Sousa says you cannot suspend attitudes, Roberts says you can. Suspension of attitudes does seem a part of interpersonal relationships: we sometimes try to get along with people we don't approve of by temporarily neutralizing our disapproval. Moreover, such "suspending" goes on at many levels: as Roberts says, "you may entertain an interpretation of a text that you do not believe to be the correct interpretation."²³ De Sousa would likely reply that it's the *belief* (presumably, that the interpretation is false) that's been suspended, not the attitude. But it gets difficult to distinguish one's attitude towards a proposition—thinking it false or suspecting it of being false—from one's belief that it is false. Even if there really are two distinct items here, one typically needs to suspend both in order to enter fully into the text and "see the world" in terms of it.

Consider the following example. A. J. Ayer is just finishing up chapter 2 of *Language, Truth and Logic*. He absentmindedly picks up Leibniz's *Monadology* and reads "Monads are the true atoms of nature." He might be able to suspend his belief that the claim is false, though that would require considerable talent and effort. But his biggest uphill battle involves fighting off his anti-metaphysical attitudes: true atoms of nature, indeed! This is a delusion, rubbish! he might think. Should we say, with de Sousa, that these attitudes are unsuspensionable just because they *are* attitudes? Why couldn't Ayer settle back, take a deep breath, and read on all the way through section 90, admiring from a contemplative vantage point the beauty of Leibniz's ingeniously contrived system?

Atheist Charles Mauron's example of enjoying the works of the Franciscan painter Giotto illustrates the same point:

As an atheist, I shall seek in it not reasons for believing, but the flavor of a particular state of mind. And so, for the space of a second, I, the unbeliever, must become like the man whose faith persuaded the beasts of the field, yet without ceasing to be the stranger who looks on....

Men with very strong conviction will always regard it as an impious masquerade to put on, even

for a moment, feelings other than their own. But after all, does not intellectual sincerity consist in being various where one should be various, single where one should be single?²⁴

Fortunately, we often can circumvent the dismal plight of the philistine by suspending beliefs and attitudes so as to gain access to the aesthetic dimensions of a text, a painting or a play. We enter into the hypothetical world of the artist, leaving our own considered opinions and ethical convictions behind. And if we are right about humor being an aesthetic emotion, then the aesthetic suspension is perfectly paralleled by humor: we can place in abeyance our scruples and the attitudes they presuppose in order to enjoy a humorous text, a joke or funny situation.

De Sousa also seems to be assuming a single attitude towards sexism: one is either for or against. But attitudes can be held with varying degrees of intensity, and whether an attitude can be suspended or "bracketed" may depend on how strongly it is held. The strength of an attitude's "grip" depends on many empirically-determined variables, including (1) one's tolerance for "isms"; (2) one's skill in wielding that noetic scalpel required to excise just the

right attitudes from one's current frame of mind; and (3) one's ability to enter imaginatively into creative settings.

Consider an active feminist who is quite sensitive to "isms" and weak in the ability to suspend attitudes and invoke imagination. He would likely be far less able to abide *Taming of the Shrew* than an Elizabethan scholar who, while opposing sexism, had a higher tolerance for it and could more readily set aside attitudes to enter into creative, speculative settings.

In relation to the imaginative, possibility-creating nature of aesthetic situations, there is a further problem concerning how "should" can be brought to bear upon such topics at all. Hume speaks of the difficulty of letting an "ought" constrain or be constrained by an "is." It would be even more difficult, in judging artistic works that are fictional, and thus often speculative, to make an "ought" constrain or be constrained by a "could be."

Finally, advertent humor seems to be intimately connected with the arts because it is one of the aesthetic genres—for example, sex comedies. Whether sex is already comic is a subject too advanced for this paper.²⁵

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NOTES

1. Most of the material on humor is collected in John Morreall (ed.) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). John Morreall has also written a book on humor, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983). See esp. pp. 90-96 of Morreall's 1983 book for the best available treatment of the aesthetic dimension of humor—e.g., the use of imagination and distancing, and the role of humor in literature.
2. Unlike many emotions, humor seems not to require a care or concern for the objects involved. Since we won't be developing a general theory of emotion here, this primitive characterization will suffice to describe the general territory within which we intend to locate the province of humor. More details are available in Robert C. Roberts, "Is Amusement an Emotion?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 25 (1988), pp. 269-74.
3. Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, David F. Swenson (trans.), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), p. 461; reprinted in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 88.
4. Robert C. Roberts, "Humor and the Virtues," *Inquiry*, vol. 31 (1988), pp. 127-49; quotation from p. 146; he is referring to Morreall's *Taking Laughter Seriously*, *op. cit.*, 1983, p. 50.
5. Roberts, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 146.
6. Mark Twain, "How to Tell a Story," first published in *The Youth's Companion*, Oct. 3, 1895; reprinted in Sculley Bradley, Richmond C. Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and George Perkins (eds.) *The American Tradition in Literature*, Vol. 2 (Grosset & Dunlap, 1974), pp. 181-85; quotation from p. 181.

7. See Roberts, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 131 for a discussion of Socrates' "laughless" humor.
8. Roberts similarly separates sensation-feelings from higher-level, more cognitively involved feelings, in Robert C. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 97 (1988), pp. 183-209; see esp. p. 183, conditions 1. and 3.
9. See Rita L. Atkinson, Richard C. Atkinson, and Ernest R. Hilgard, *Introduction to Psychology* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), pp. 333-34 for experimental evidence involving subjects with spinal cord injuries.
10. John Morreall, "Humor and Emotion," in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, quotations from p. 220.
11. Jan van Hoof, "Facial Expressions" in David McFarland (ed.) *Oxford Companion to Animal Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), all quotations from p. 172.
12. Moreall, "Humor and Emotion," *op. cit.*, pp. 222-23.
13. See Henri Bergson's "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic," an excerpt of which is conveniently available in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, pp. 117-26.
14. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (Part I, section 54), J. H. Bernard (trans.) (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), pp. 176- 77.
15. Mike W. Martin, "Humor and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities," in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 181.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 180; also Moreall, *op. cit.*, 1983, p. 90.
17. Morreall, *op. cit.*, 1983, pp. 89-92.
18. Martin, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
19. John Hospers, *Meaning and Truth in the Arts* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946), p. 4.
20. The most explicit discussion is in Ronald de Sousa, "When Is it Wrong to Laugh?" in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, pp. 239-41. Essentially the same material, but with some important additions is in Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), chapter 11. In neither version does he explicitly address the issue of whether one should laugh at Shakespeare's sexist jokes. This theme is explored further in Joseph Boskin, "The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo," in Morreall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 1987, pp. 250-63.
21. De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion*, *op. cit.*, 1987, p. 280.
22. See John Russell Brown (ed.), *The Arden Edition of The Merchant of Venice* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1959), p. xxxiii.
23. Roberts, *op. cit.*, 1988, p. 137.
24. Charles Mauron, *Esthetics and Psychology* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1935), pp. 66-68. Quoted in John Hospers, *op. cit.*, 1946, p. 217.
25. We thank Robert C. Roberts for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper.